

The Sun.

BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

TWELVE
PAGES

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, AUGUST 10, 1919.

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SECTION
SIX

"Mare Nostrum" and Its Sailor

V. Blasco Ibanez Revives the Race of Heroes and the Figure of Capt. Ulysses Ferragut Takes Place Among Them

WHEN you see, at the beginning of the new Blasco Ibañez novel, as the heading of the first chapter the words *Captain Ulysses Ferragut*, it may remind you (if you ever knew) that our own Farragut was a sailor of Mediterranean ancestry. When you have gone a little way in the book you will think (if you ever read it) of a sketch in Joseph Conrad's *The Mirror of the Sea*, an autobiographical bit concerned with the days when Conrad was part of the crew of a Mediterranean smuggling craft. When you have come to the end of the last page you will say aloud (and no "if" about it) that this is as great a book as the author's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. You will be vibrantly aware of the same epic proportioning, of the same sense of sweeping drama and human destiny, of the same magic of words fully mastering the reader's senses and playing at will upon his emotions. You will be breathless.

Breathless, and not for the first time in reading *Mare Nostrum*; no! There is passage after passage of pure beauty, beauty in the old Greek tradition and evoked, half the time, by old Greek myths and deeds; there are moments of the most terrible passion, terrible sometimes in nature and at other times in fierce intensity. All the chords of memory and reminiscence are sounded in those readers who have them. All the human feelings, and some hardly human, are stirred—savagery, hate, joy, the tenderness of humor, the moment of wistful sadness. The book goes over you in waves, like the many sounding ocean; it has color, life, madness and a reposeful sanity; it has Sargasso seas in which the author accumulates vast floating islands of debris, historical, romantic, fabulous, disordered and enchanting. It has swift tides and unsuspected deeps.

II.

The action of the story is uncomplicated. It starts with a boy of ten dreaming in a Valencian shrine. This is Ulysses Ferragut, of a famed seafaring family of Catalans. His father and mother do not matter, or matter very little. An uncle nicknamed the Triton is the person that counts in the early pages of the novel and in the earlier years of its hero. It is this adorable figure that turns the youngster's thoughts unchangeably toward ships. And how Blasco Ibañez does put the Triton on paper! Contemplating the portrait, so live, so vigorous, that it seems as if the man were walking to meet you, the reporter's joy is checked by the thought that very few who have not known well the sea and sailors will be able to recognize how faithful and vital a picture is before them.

It is from the Triton that the growing boy learns the wonders of Mare Nostrum, "our sea," as the Latins call the Mediterranean. The Triton



The jacket of "Mare Nostrum." The book will be published on Friday, August 15.

is as well versed in Mare Nostrum's history as any scholar; he knows, besides, every shoal and deep. All that he has to tell, from the legend of Poseidon and Amphitrite, to the veritable fact of the Catalan Grand Company and the time when Spaniards ruled in Greece; from the first trading ventures of the Phoenicians to the reason for the Gibraltar current—all, all of his wealth of knowledge, conveyed to his nephew, is condensed by Blasco Ibañez for the benefit of the reader. This profusion of history, fable, science, fills page after page of the novel. It may often, with its allusions, bewilder readers unacquainted with the story of the Latin races; others will merely be perplexed by it and will pass rapidly on, leaping after the story. Such a chase is easy. We are not aware that the scientific knowledge diffused through it has kept the unlearned from reading *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Likewise, in *Mare Nostrum*, the incredibly rich background is

there for those who can feed upon it. For the others, what?

III.

A story! A thriller! A narrative of German submarine warfare in the great inland sea, of a famous and honorable sea captain whose mad infatuation for a woman involved him in an expedition to supply with oil the German supersubmarines, slipping in gray and shadowy submergence past the great Gibraltar rock. A tale of how his eyes were tragically opened to the enormity of what he had done, of how he paid a terrible penalty and how he wrought a final atonement. A tale of a woman—a spy, an abnormal creature if you will; but fundamentally a woman—perfumed, cold, passionate, dangerous, beautiful! There is, of course, the Latinity in the handling of a sex affair that is racial with Blasco Ibañez and present in *The Four Horsemen*; but it is frankness without offensiveness, it is always in the grip of a strict sense of proportion,

and if it is not austere it is most certainly unrelenting. Vice is made anything but attractive; there is the blue, salt, cleansing sea on every littoral.

Some features of the history of Freya Talberg will remind readers of the case of a woman, not a German, famous as a dancer in Batavia and elsewhere, who was executed as a spy in or near Paris in time of war. It seems likely that Blasco Ibañez, who has long resided in Paris, drew upon the facts of this actual life for his novel; if not, then his whole story is much more solidly founded on fact than even the most literal reader is likely to imagine. But concerning this aspect of *Mare Nostrum* we wish to say nothing. It is perhaps not yet time to tell the whole truth about the German supersubmersibles in the inland sea. We will say this: The novelist has had access to official records and has availed himself lightly of what he knows.

IV.

Do you recall Madariaga, the centaur of the Argentine plains, who rode in *The Four Horsemen*? There is portraiture as wonderful in *Mare Nostrum*. The Triton overshadows all, to our taste, but Captain Ferragut and Freya Talberg bulk larger in the whole canvas. One of the most captivating figures in the novel is a ship's cook, Caragol. Well, he is worthy of any novelist that ever put pen to paper! Equally successful is the likeness of Toni, Captain Ferragut's mate, a man more humdrum except in the stress of that hour when he broke the spell of a whole lifetime of obedience. The proposal was to load oil for the replenishing of the gray shapes slipping past Gibraltar. "No!" said Toni. He was no hand at putting his thoughts into words. But it stuck in his head that always he had been a republican, and against kings. "No! No!"

To all such as love blue water this book will be one of the great novels of all time. It will seem incontestably great to all the thousands who love the legendary and the heroic. The pride, the affection, the tradition, of great days and races of heroes is exhaled as surely from its pages as from the scenes in which the action moves. From the Dardanelles it swings to the Herculean pillars, and in the account of Ferragut's apprenticeship to the sea beyond those pillars and over the rim of the world. In a few paragraphs is compressed all of Masfield's *Gallipoli*. In a few pages is presented a panorama of civilized history. And in the twelve long chapters there is a matchless story of a godlike mortal who was tempted and sinned and who achieved the redemption which, as Conrad would say, the immortal sea permits to her worshippers.

MARE NOSTRUM (OUR SEA). By VICENTE BLASCO IBANEZ. E. P. Dutton & Co.